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Ethical case discussions in the ethnological research

Anthropological Research – Financed by Whom?

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Ethical and Deontological Think Tank (EDTT)

The ethical and deontological think tank (EDTT) was created by the Swiss Ethnological Society (SES) in 2008. Its first work has been to endow the SSE of a stand on the ethics of research, published and accepted at the General Assembly in 2010. Wishing to extend the debate, the EDTT decided to continue its activities in publishing case discussions on the SES website. Based on focused research examples, these case discussions should on the one hand present the ethical issues faced by researchers at various "moments" of the research, and on the other hand contribute to the reflection on what led the researchers to choose a particular solution. By publishing these case discussions, the intention of the EDTT does not consist in setting up itself as a "controller" or a "guarantor" of any ethics of anthropology. It is rather to document, in an educational and reflexive way, the place of ethics in the various "moments" of the research process and to show how ethics can be concretely integrated into the reality of fieldwork.

The EDTT wants to promote dialogue and invites you to respond to this case discussion by writing to gred@seg-sse.ch

Link to the ethical stand of the SES (in German and French):

[http://www.seg-sse.ch/pdf/2011-04-11_Stellungnahme_SEG\(DE\).pdf](http://www.seg-sse.ch/pdf/2011-04-11_Stellungnahme_SEG(DE).pdf)

[http://www.seg-sse.ch/pdf/2011-04-11_Position_Ethique_SSE\(FR\).pdf](http://www.seg-sse.ch/pdf/2011-04-11_Position_Ethique_SSE(FR).pdf)

Ethical case discussion available on-line on the address:

http://www.seg-sse.ch/pdf/2012-10-30_Leins.pdf

To quote this ethical case discussion:

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Anthropological Research – Financed by Whom?

By Stefan Leins, University of Zürich

It is said that Swiss people do not like to talk about money. In my opinion, anthropologists do not like it either. We practice and teach anthropology because it is our passion. To see it as a way to earn a living would feel awkward. This is why we do not normally talk about salaries and funding, even though it is of course of importance to us all. In Switzerland, most anthropologists receive financial support for their research. In the majority of cases, these funds are paid by the Swiss public and are distributed by the universities themselves or by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). Additionally, there are a number of private foundations that sponsor research projects and careers in anthropology. Recently, an increasing number of private, for-profit institutions have also started to offer research grants to social scientists. As opposed to the public and foundation-based grants, the anthropological community regards this type of funding with considerable skepticism. This skepticism is of course legitimate, since the private institutions' interests in financing research could be based on a political agenda, thus restricting the anthropologist's academic freedom, or the result could be the misuse of anthropological research for economic concerns. Still, grants from the private sector also offer opportunities to anthropologists. They can open doors to new field sites, help to promote anthropology as a discipline outside academia, and empower researchers to be more independent of reductions in public spending and of the Government's political agenda.

As an anthropologist who is funded by a private, for-profit institution, I've had engage with this issue quite intensively over the last two years. When talking to

colleagues, I've been often confronted with the question of whether the fact that I am being paid by a for-profit institution that is similarly hosting my fieldwork has ethical implications for my research. I think this question is entirely justified and should, therefore, be subject to discussion. However, I would argue that the implicit (or explicit) influence of sponsors on research should be questioned not only by researchers who are funded privately, but also by those who receive money from public sources. The SNSF, for example, sponsors a number of anthropological studies on migration and ethnic minorities in Switzerland. Here, researchers should be aware that the results they produce could very well be of political interest to the Swiss government. Knowing how migration works and understanding ethnic minorities is very important to the state in a globalized environment. Although the SNSF guarantees academic freedom to the researchers involved in its projects, implied expectations of the sponsor can still represent an ethical challenge to the researcher – an issue that is rarely discussed by anthropologists. Financial dependence, I would claim, can be an issue in any kind of research project. Since most of us, however, need some type of research grant to finance our academic projects, the only way to cope with this issue is to promote an active discussion of and reflection on the politics of grant-giving.¹

Accessing a new social arena

¹ I would like to express gratitude to Julie Perrin and the other members of the EDTT for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

In spring 2010, I was preparing the fieldwork phase of my PhD project. Having written my master's thesis about the institutional framework of the Islamic financial market in Bahrain, I became more interested in a subfield in my discipline, the anthropology of finance. Anthropology of finance focuses on financial markets as social arenas and involves the study through ethnography of the social life of its "natives", the financial market participants. In the last few years, an increasing number of anthropologists and sociologists have started to conduct research among financial market participants and in multinational corporations to explore the anthropological dimensions of people working in the financial markets². On reading the existing work of anthropologists active in this field, I recognized the importance of long-term participant observation in understanding the social (and technical) logics of financial markets and their agents (Abolafia 1996; Ho 2009; Lépinay 2011; Zaloom 2006). The question I was then faced with was how to secure access to a financial institution. In my personal case, the solution was to apply to a private sector research program that enabled me to do fieldwork in the area I was interested in. After much time spent looking for cooperative opportunities, a Swiss bank that offers an internal PhD program³ accepted my

application and allowed me to do fieldwork at the bank. Swiss Bank's⁴ PhD program was not originally designed for anthropologists. In fact, I was the first social scientist ever to join the program. My ten fellows on the program were economists and law school graduates. To them, the program was not primarily a means to become a scientist with field access, but rather an opportunity to gain a PhD – a title that still does have considerable symbolic power in the private economy, even though economists like to argue that the process of gaining a PhD is far too time-consuming – and, simultaneously, begin a career with a financial institution. As a member of Swiss Bank's PhD program, I had to participate in the bank's daily business three days a week (the perfect way to conduct participant observation). On the remaining two days, I was allowed to work on my research project.

In the lion's den

When I decided to join Swiss Bank's PhD program, it was clear to me that my research set-up would involve a number of ethical and methodological challenges. However, in order to gain access to the financial institution, I wanted to take this risk. After having finished my fieldwork, I can now identify three groups of ethical challenge that illustrate major differences between being financed by a public and a private institution. All three groups show that research funded by a for-profit institution, as opposed to publicly funded research, relies much more on a cooperative approach, in which both parties can benefit from the ethnographer in the field⁵.

² Jane Guyer, Ellen Hertz, Karen Ho, Bill Maurer, Hiro Miyazaki, Annelise Riles and Caitlin Zaloom are among the most important anthropologists representing this subfield. In sociology, Michel Callon, Marieke de Goede, Karin Knorr-Cetina, Vincent Lépinay, Donald MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa, Alex Preda and Urs Stäheli have significantly contributed to the field of the social studies of finance.

³ As part of the PhD program, PhD students are expected to work three days a week in the bank. On the other two days, the students can pursue their PhD using the experiences gained and data collected during their working time. The bank's contribution to the PhD is limited to the monthly salary, which includes one extra day paid for time spent on the PhD and the opportunity to use data collected at the bank. However, the bank does not organize any

classes, peer group meetings or similar activities.

⁴ Swiss Bank (SB) is a pseudonym I use in my academic writing. The use of a pseudonym allows me to write freely about my fieldwork without directly exposing the institution that has granted me access to the field.

⁵ To explore new and interesting research arenas, a growing number of anthropologists argue that these kinds of cooperative

Knowledge for access

Swiss Bank's motivation to accept me onto the program was primarily due to my expertise in Islamic finance, an investment style that has become an interesting business area for Swiss Bank. By joining Swiss Bank's PhD program, I thus agreed to allow them to benefit from my knowledge on Islamic finance. During my time at Swiss Bank, I produced research reports on Islamic finance and advised the bank's clients on how to invest in this particular area. Through my active participation, I therefore partly "went native" during my fieldwork. On the one hand, this facilitated my task of understanding the processes of financial analysis (which I aimed to study). On the other hand, I became a part of the financial machinery, which I intended to observe critically. In order to meet Swiss Bank's expectations, I often had to talk and write about "culture" in a way that did not necessarily meet the anthropological expectations of critical reflection. To use anthropological knowledge for financial analysis, cultural processes have to be made countable. I was often asked how investors could possibly benefit from cultural processes in an economic way. Even though I liked to share my knowledge with the financial analysts, I often felt uncomfortable using my knowledge for the sake of empowering Swiss Bank to gain more money, clients and revenue.

Disciplining and restriction of access

As a part of my "initiation rite", I had to sign a seventy-page contract before starting my fieldwork. In the contract, my academic freedom was explicitly guaranteed, as long as my research did not violate Swiss bank secrecy or the bank's "fundamental business interests". Probably, it was due to the guarantee of academic freedom that I was not free to choose the department in which my

fieldwork would take place. The decision to work in the financial analysis department was heavily influenced by the PhD program's coordinators. The reason for that was partly because financial analysis does have certain similarities with academic research and therefore represented a potential for synergy for many of the PhD students on the program. However, the decision was also influenced by the fact that, in contrast to many other departments at the bank, financial analysts do not have access to the bank's own client data⁶. Placing the members of the PhD program in the financial analysis department was thus a convenient way to minimize the risk of exposing sensitive data to the members of the program, and so most were placed there. For me, this meant that the bank influenced the choice of my explicit field setting as well as the limits of what I was able to observe. On critical reflection, this kind of allocation of a specific field site is problematic. However, it not only illustrates the restrictive treatment of researchers at the bank, but also the reality of most employees of Swiss Bank. In order to be able to control the image and legal conformity of the bank, employees are disciplined by legal contracts, compliance trainings, the control of exchange of data, emails, phone calls and even by restrictions on physical access to other departments at the bank. As an anthropologist at the bank, I had to take a subordinate role to the bank's governing regime and accept the fact that my access was limited to the financial analysis department.

Expectations, commitment and financial dependence

The fact that the institution I wanted to study directly financed me as a researcher represented another ethical challenge in

approaches are a useful and necessary way to gain access to new social arenas (Flamant 2009; Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion & Rees 2008).

⁶ Financial analysts spend their time studying the developments of financial markets to elaborate investment strategies for the bank's clients. Thus, the focus of financial analysts is not the bank's own business, but rather the financial markets.

my fieldwork. As mentioned above, the motivation to finance me as a researcher was heavily dependent on my knowledge of Islamic finance and Swiss Bank's hope to use anthropological knowledge to make "culture" investable. As a consequence, I had to cope with the expectations of Swiss Bank that I could eventually produce data that they could use for business purposes. The fact that they applied my Islamic finance expertise could, of course, be denounced as a "sell-out" of anthropological knowledge. However, I have always thought of it as a way to show the applicability of anthropological knowledge in market situations, realizing that this knowledge could not really be used to exploit market participants. Concerning my own academic research, I did explain to them that my data would not generate any results that they could later use for business purposes. This, however, was not a major issue. The supervisors of Swiss Bank's PhD program knew that even for the PhD students in economics, the academic requirements substantially differed from the requirements for data to be used in everyday business. Consequently, our cooperative approach did not primarily focus on my academic work, but rather on the research and reports I produced during my weekly three days of active participation at Swiss Bank.

Do private grants challenge the anthropologist's ethical requirements?

My experience shows that ethnography conducted within a corporation and also paid for by a private institution comes at a price. In fact, it shows that the issue of private financing of anthropological research is mainly a question of potential conflicting interests: What do the involved parties expect from the cooperative approach? Does the sourcing institution want the researcher to produce a specific result? Are there processes observed by the anthropologist in the field that cannot be published, because they could harm the sponsor's reputation? Is the data resulting from the

study later used for political and economic purposes later?

In my case, the hope that I would discover something of use to Swiss Bank was never explicitly expressed during my time in the field. I was always free to discuss the processes I observed critically and to publish my findings. This was mainly due to the fact that my academic research was not part of Swiss Bank's expectation. Their motive for a cooperative approach relied on using my anthropological background and knowledge about Islamic finance during my time of active participation in the financial analysis department. After all, the use of my knowledge to do business came to be the most critical part of the corporation between Swiss Bank and me. I knew that my expertise on Islamic finance was applied for economic purposes by the bank. However, I was also given a chance to teach the bankers about the importance of anthropological research and to help establish a more sophisticated perspective on the topics anthropologists deal with. This, in my view, can be significant because financial institutions today shape realities that go far beyond the economic sphere. Anthropologists who understand the processes of finance can actively participate in this shaping of realities and can engage in political discussions on the nature of finance, financial regulation, or the perils of capitalism. Private research grants can thus open doors for an applied anthropology in the field of finance (see Maurer 2012 for an introduction to applied anthropology of finance).

Beyond these potential conflicting interests, I do not think that private grants generally challenge the anthropologist's ethical requirements. In my opinion, all sources of money that are used to finance anthropological research should be given critical reflection. There is, however, no reason to reject any of them categorically. In future, I think that more emphasis should be placed on how anthropological research is financed. Of course, it goes without saying that new ways of financing anthropological research must never

challenge academic freedom and critical reflection, or simply promote economically

or politically motivated research, contract research, or research on demand.

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[Abstract]

The financing of research is an important, but little debated topic within anthropology. Since most Swiss anthropologists are funded by the public, conflicting interests resulting from divergences between a sponsor's interests and a researcher's results have hardly been discussed. With the emergence of a number of private sector research grants in social sciences, the questions of how research is funded and whether there might be ethical issues attached to it have now become more obvious. As an anthropologist whose fieldwork is financed by a for-profit institution, I would like to stimulate a debate on the ethical dimensions of financed anthropological research. Based on my personal experiences, I will argue that private grants are sometimes necessary for researchers to access new research arenas such as financial markets or corporations. I will, however, also show that being funded by a for-profit institution can cause moral and methodological trouble for a researcher. To cope with these issues, I will suggest that all anthropologists, including the ones that are getting money from the state, should reflect more actively on their financial resources in order help colleagues, peers and readers understand the financial embedment of their research projects.

[Keywords]

Private Grant Giving, Politics of Grant Giving, Ethnography in Corporations, Anthropology of Finance